

## Freedom of the Press

While Qatar's flagship satellite television channel, Al-Jazeera, is permitted to air critical reports on foreign countries and leaders, journalists are subject to prosecution for criticizing the Qatari government, the ruling family, or Islam. Article 47 of the constitution "assures" freedom of expression "according to circumstances and conditions" prescribed by law. The 1979 Press and Publications Law is administered by the criminal courts and assigns jail sentences for libel. The penal code also provides penalties for defamation and truth is not necessarily a defense for libel. In addition, broadly framed antiterrorism legislation can also be used to restrict freedom of expression.

The Advisory Council, Qatar's appointed legislative body, drafted a new press law in 2011 that would eliminate the jailing of journalists for defamation, prohibit officials from questioning journalists without a court order, and permit journalists to keep their sources confidential unless instructed otherwise by a court. Multiple provisions would regulate online media. A revised version of the draft was approved by the Advisory Council in June 2012. The added provisions would abolish criminal charges for media law offenses and criticism of the Qatari rulers. However, stiff financial penalties would be imposed for the broadcasting or publication of any news or information that criticizes the Qatari government or its allies, harms national interests, or offends the ruling family. The revised draft law had not yet been approved by the emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, at the end of 2013. A separate draft law, aimed at curtailing cybercrime, was approved by the cabinet in 2013, and contained troubling provisions criminalizing online content that undermined "social principles and values" or reported on sensitive topics. The law was still awaiting royal assent at year's end.

Qatar lacks a freedom of information law granting citizens the right to access state-held information. Government data is also difficult to access in practice, as official reporting on such topics as law, state spending, and demographics is often incomplete, untimely, or entirely absent.

All publications are subject to government licensing. The government, the Qatar Radio and Television Corporation, and customs officers are authorized to censor domestic and foreign publications and broadcast media for religious, political, and sexual content prior to distribution. Online content is censored through the country's sole internet service provider, which is state owned. Users are directed to a proxy server that maintains a list of banned websites and blocks material deemed inconsistent with the religious, cultural, political, and moral values of the country. The Doha Centre for Media Freedom, a government-backed organization ostensibly dedicated to press freedom, fired director Jan Keulen in late 2013. The center had published a report on the weak media laws of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in 2012 and noted the need for more media freedom and transparency in Qatar. Keulen had also expressed disappointment in the local media in connection with the 15-year prison sentence a Qatari poet received for reciting a poem about the Arab Spring on YouTube.

Self-censorship is reportedly widespread, although *Doha News*, an online news site, has been able to publish news stories critical of the government—which the established media outlets avoid—without interference or reprisals. The Qatari media largely ignored a May 2012 fire in the popular Villaggio shopping center in Doha that killed 19 people, including 13 children. Local outlets were reportedly ordered by a court to refrain from covering the trial of those held responsible for the blaze; the accused included a member of the ruling family, Sheikh Ali bin Jassim al-Thani, who owned the day care center where many victims

became trapped, and his wife, who managed the center. The *Doha News* published a summary of the daycare fire that described in detail the government's failures in responding to the disaster. The judge presiding over the case would not allow *Doha News* staff to attend the trial, saying that only "official" media outlets were allowed. Local media did not cover later parts of the trial although no official reason was offered.

Foreigners make up a majority of the media workers in the country, and there is a disparity in the authorities' treatment of Qatari and non-Qatari journalists. While local reporters often receive warnings and threats when they push the limits of permissible coverage, noncitizens employed by Qatari media outlets risk harsher repercussions, including termination, deportation, and imprisonment. All foreign journalists working in the country must be accredited by the Qatar Foreign Information Agency and sponsored by a local institution or the Information Ministry. However, journalists in compliance with these rules can still be barred from entering the country, and on occasion they have been subject to harassment and arrest after engaging in journalistic activities within Qatar. A German journalist was arrested in October 2013 for filming at construction sites preparing for the 2022 World Cup. The treatment of foreign construction workers has been a concern for human rights groups but receives little coverage in the mainstream press. The German journalist was released the next day after admitting that he did not receive permission to film in the country.

Cases of physical harassment of journalists and bloggers are rare, and although some have been subject to detention without charge as a consequence of their work, no such cases occurred in 2013.

Qatar has seven newspapers that publish in either Arabic or English, all of which are owned by members of the ruling family or their business associates. The state owns and operates all broadcast media, and there are only two television networks in the country, Qatar TV and Al-Jazeera. While Qatar TV broadcasts mostly official news and progovernment perspectives, Al-Jazeera focuses its coverage on regional and global news, providing only sparse and uncritical reports on local issues. Programming on local radio stations is more accommodating to criticism of government services and operations. The concentration of media ownership within the ruling family and the high financial costs and citizenship requirements for obtaining media licenses continue to hinder the expansion and freedom of the press. Approximately 85 percent of the population used the internet in 2013, with 70 percent of users relying on the web as their primary source of news and information.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Not Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

67

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

20

## **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

25

## **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

22